

Consciousness and Its Objects by Colin McGinn. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2004. 264 pp. \$35.00 (hardcover). ISBN 019926760X

Here we have a collection of papers written by McGinn over the period 1993-2001. It is intended as a follow-up to his 1991 book *The Problem of Consciousness*, in which he argues that the philosophical problem of the relation of mind to body can never be solved due to an inherent limitation of the human concept-forming capacity, which he refers to as *cognitive closure*.

McGinn calls this position *epistemic mysterianism*. It is not to be confused with ontological mysterianism, which holds that the problem would require a supernatural explanation. In McGinn's view the relation between mind and body must be a natural one even though the human cognitive closure prevents us from understanding it. Therefore he also calls his view *transcendental naturalism* (McGinn p. 182). The mind-body relation transcends human cognitive capacity but nonetheless "the world itself is as smoothly natural and seamless as one could wish" (McGinn p. 64).

While the papers gathered here are very much in the context of professional philosophical discourse, the thesis impinges the borders of neuroscience, cosmology, biology and psychology. Aside from its possible interest to philosophers and scientists, those who would feel spiritual or metaphysical interest in the idea of profound universal mystery may find his arguments compelling. McGinn writes in a particular philosophical style with clever turns of phrase and a variety of approaches, making the text (hopefully) accessible to a wide spectrum of readers.

We find, for example, a fantasy scenario in which McGinn has a humorous dispute with an alien being whose views are opposed to his own, a methodological excursion aiming to show that his theory predicts the sorts of dilemmas characteristic of the most knotty philosophical problems, a curious thought experiment outlining a theory of mind on the analogy of ancient Greek atomism, and a journey to the more recent past, where the basis of the argument rests largely on a recitation of Bertrand Russell's sense-data oriented views of 1912.

In this review I will undertake particularly to develop a sense of the philosophical context within which I believe McGinn is operating, and suggest a remedial way of looking at things.

McGinn's Account of the Problem

For McGinn, the mind-body problem is the problem of explaining how conscious states are caused by the brain. It is actually a mind-brain problem (McGinn, pp. 56-57). The argument below is, I think, a fair distillation of his theory.

1. We know that conscious states cannot be reduced to brain states.
2. But conscious states *are* caused by brain states.
3. Therefore we feel a sense of an inescapable philosophical problem.
4. The concept-forming ability of the human brain is limited by a cognitive closure.
5. The mind-brain causal relation is outside that limit.
6. Therefore we can never solve the mind-body problem.

This argument has two parts. The first two premises yield (3), while the fourth and fifth yield (6). If we compare (3) and (6) it would appear that we are in a kind of ongoing existential crisis, because we feel a sense of an inescapable problem that can never be solved. On the other hand, McGinn seems to think that this acknowledgment of a fundamental limitation of the mind

may have a kind of liberating effect: “We need simply to accept our deep ignorance” (McGinn, p. 69). This has been the advice of skeptics at least as far back as Pyrrho (ca. 360 BC - ca. 270 BC). We can’t solve the problem, so why worry? But rather than adopt either a skeptical or an existentialist viewpoint, perhaps we should probe a bit further.

Essential to McGinn’s argument is (2). The basis for this premise is the evidence supplied by neuroscience for correlations between activity in the brain and conscious states: “Brain states cause conscious states – that is what observation suggests” (McGinn, p. 57). But (2) is contradicted by (1). So (1) is the source of our sense that there is a mind-body – or rather mind-*brain* – problem. And (1) is supported by an argument which invokes the view of perception put forward by Bertrand Russell in 1912.

According to Russell, when we see and touch a physical object like a table, we don’t really see or feel the table. What we really see is variously shaped patches of color and what we feel are various sensations of touch, etc. These are sense-data. We infer that there is a table on the basis of these data. And we know the sense-data *directly* by “acquaintance” rather than *indirectly* by “description.” Now the special quality of things that are known by acquaintance is that you just *know* them, and that’s that. “I know the color perfectly and completely when I see it, and no further knowledge of it itself is even theoretically possible” (McGinn, p. 6, quoting Russell).

McGinn seizes on this to point out that since we have knowledge by acquaintance of our conscious states, we must know these states in the way Russell describes, perfectly and completely, with no further knowledge of them being “even theoretically possible.” McGinn then makes the remarkable assertion that our perfect and complete knowledge of our own conscious states tells us that the brain cannot cause consciousness.

...if we know the essence of consciousness by means of acquaintance, then we can *just see that* consciousness is not reducible to neural or functional processes (McGinn, p. 9, my italics).

This then is the justification for (1) and, when confronted by (2), the source of the mind-brain problem. And I have to confess that I really don’t know how to take this statement. McGinn appears to be justifying (1) by appealing to some kind of direct intuitive knowledge similar to the untenable rationalist position of Descartes regarding “clear and distinct ideas.” What McGinn can *just see* “perfectly and completely” by introspecting his own states of consciousness seems little removed in lack of verifiability from the rationalist intuitions of Descartes.

Against this idea I would point out that over the course of history many individuals have spent a great deal of time pursuing direct knowledge of consciousness by introspective meditation, and frequently such individuals report just the opposite. The dualism of mind and body disappears and instead a profound unity embracing all of existence, physical, mental and spiritual, becomes clear. Why is McGinn a better source of information about the nature of pure consciousness than, say, a Buddhist monk? The answer is that when one appeals to truth as revealed by personal introspection, there is no objective standard. (It is for this reason that I rather suspect McGinn’s underlying justification for (1) is conceptual rather than intuitive, i.e. based on a presupposition of mind-body dualism to begin with.)

However for the time being let us put this aside and instead yield the point to McGinn, that by introspection he knows the essence of consciousness, which means he knows perfectly and completely that consciousness cannot be reduced to brain states. If so, why wouldn’t that be the

end of the matter? Conscious states are not caused by the *brain*. Premise (2) is false. I heartily agree with this, although not because I accept (1). But McGinn wants to hang on to (2). After all, if he loses (2), what does he do then about the observations provided by neuroscience, that when certain conscious states occur, these are associated with activity in certain regions of the brain, which proves that the brain causes consciousness?

The Mediatory Brain

Well, one would have to conclude that a large body of neuroscientists and cognitive scientists are mistaken. This indeed is what a growing number of philosophers and cognitive scientists are thinking (Rockwell 2007, Noë 2009, Chemero 2009, Shapiro 2010). These individuals happen also to be the sort of philosopher who is not enamored by the sense data theory. They, like myself, agree that conscious states are not caused by the brain – at least not in the sense of a one-to-one or “atomistic” causality (one single physical state of the brain causes one single mental state). And McGinn ought also to agree with this, except for those pesky neuroscientists who keep telling him otherwise. Suddenly it begins to look as though the ground is trembling a bit beneath McGinn’s (philosophical) feet, and the tremors are increasing. To make the point in depth let us take a look at McGinn’s concept of memory.

We know perfectly well how it is possible for the brain...to harbor as large a memory store as it does...the number of memories is identical to the number of a (subset of the) brain’s states (McGinn, p. 13).

McGinn here espouses the data storage theory of memory. Inside the brain (metaphorically) there are a number of pigeon-holes for memories, and the number of these pigeon-holes that are filled is equal to the number of memories one has. This theory, despite its wide acceptance among neuroscientists, has been decisively shown to be deeply flawed. (If you are not sure of this, ask a neuroscientist to tell you how many memories you’ve got.) Anyway, the more probable alternative is that the role of the brain in memory is mediatory. As one critic puts it,

...it’s one thing to say that the brain *mediates* the capacity to remember, and another to say it *stores* memories. The former view (more likely the correct one) takes the brain to be an *instrument involved in the expression of memory*; the latter view turns out to be deeply unintelligible (Braude 2006, my italics).

McGinn ridicules such an idea. He assumes this must imply that the brain is an “interface” between the “real basis” of consciousness and “bodily behavior.” This is apparently because he believes that the memories must be “stored” *somewhere*. The “real basis” must be some sort of *realm* which is “nothing like anything we have ever encountered in nature” and furthermore where can it be? Perhaps it is “up in the sky,” or “underground,” and so on (McGinn, p. 57). To hold that the brain’s role in consciousness is mediatory is to subscribe to this sort of absurd fantasy.¹

¹ “Something like what McGinn suggests here is Ervin Laszlo’s theory that memories are stored in the quantum vacuum by means of “quantum holograms” and are accessed by the brain (Laszlo 2007).

This is of course a “straw man” argument, but now McGinn says something quite revealing. he argues that this would put consciousness in a strange *location*. Conscious states would be located where the real basis is located, “since the location of the mind is parasitic on the location of the physical basis” (McGinn, p. 57). And of course if the real basis is underground, or in the sky, then that’s where the mind is located. Ergo, *reductio ad absurdum*.

I will return to this point later. First however it is necessary to deflate McGinn’s restrictive idea of what might be meant by calling the brain’s role mediatory. To do this is to reject that aforementioned narrow idea of causality, in which some single event in the brain stands in a direct causal relation to some single mental state. W. T. Rockwell for example argues against this atomistic causality, citing Mill’s view that causes cannot be separated from their context of conditions (Rockwell 2007, p. 54).

What then is the proposed context of conditions within which the brain has an important, but not atomistically causal, function? We are moved here into the realm of the contemporary theory of Extended Cognition (EC), which is the theory that the physical basis of mind includes not only the entire nervous system and the body that supports it, but also a person’s engagement with the world through activity *in* the world. Alva Noë, citing “evidence that the brain gives rise to consciousness by *enabling an exchange* between the person or animal and the world,” (my italics) says

What emerges...is a new conception of ourselves as expanded, extended and dynamic...Where do you stop, and where does the rest of the world begin? There is no reason to suppose that the critical boundary is found in our brains or our skin (Noë 2009, pp. 67-68).

Someone might object to this on the ground that even if the “real base” of consciousness is such a larger nexus, it is still “physical” and so the problem remains. What the critic is missing here is the term “dynamic.” Rockwell speaks of such a dynamic system as a “behavioral field” involving environmental interactions, time, and energy (Rockwell 2007, p. 86). This kind of system is of a different order than that of the brain by itself. McGinn’s point is well taken: consciousness would somehow be *located* in such a dynamic system, which perforce overlaps with multiple other such systems and may extend over a very wide field in space-time. In such a scenario the concepts of “cause” and “location,” and even perhaps the concept of “physical basis,” may well be irrelevant to the issue or at least in need of revision. (A fundamental problem of the sense-data theory is that it excludes the role of *action in the world* from its concept of cognition and substitutes a kind of passive observer, i.e. the philosopher sitting at his desk looking at patches of color inside his brain.)

But it is not my purpose here to attempt to account for the way in which a dynamic interactive spatiotemporal system of this sort involves the existence of consciousness. The direction I am going is rather different. What I hope to make clear is the radical difference between McGinn’s perspective and that of the proponents of a quite different line of thought exemplified by the nondualistic views of American Pragmatism and particularly the views of John Dewey, whose philosophy is a key inspiration for EC theory. To put it succinctly, it is more or less a waste of time to try to deal with McGinn’s convoluted argumentation within his own frame of reference. The cards are stacked against you in advance. Really to understand what is going on one must move to a quite different frame, one which Dewey referred to refreshingly as the “open out-of-doors air and light of day” (Dewey 1930).

McGinn's Conceptual Straitjacket

The actual cognitive closure involved in McGinn's epistemic mysterianism, I believe, is not the limiting factors which everyone might agree must exist for human knowledge relative to any given time and any given state of science. It is instead a closure resulting from the set of concepts which McGinn himself utilizes in adumbrating the problem and subsequently arguing that it cannot be solved. And this set of concepts is nothing new. It has persisted in philosophy, in science, in religion, and in the popular mind. McGinn is operating within a conceptual framework which might even be called a kind of "folk metaphysics." And what it is, is mind-body dualism.

McGinn himself agrees to this interpretation. He refers to the "conceptual dualism inherent in our introspective and perceptual concepts" (McGinn p. 21). He thinks dualism lies at the foundation of our consciousness, and by including *perceptual concepts*, he reveals that he believes there is an inescapable dualism here as well. Indeed, the extreme subjectivism of the Russellian view of perception, to which McGinn subscribes, divides the perceiving subject from the world and puts perception and knowledge of a physical (outer) world into irreconcilably separate categories. All of McGinn's argumentation and conceptual structuring is characteristic of an underlying dualistic view of things. Not only does he not deny this, he relies entirely upon it in order to make his argument stick. So if it weren't for those darned neuroscientists with their mind-brain correlations we would have no problem. We would just be dualists.

His resolution of this dilemma is to invoke cognitive closure and transcendental naturalism. We can never escape the dualism but somewhere within another conceptual framework, the existential problem of (3) must be resolved. With this I heartily agree; except that what appears to McGinn to be "transcendental" may not be so far away after all, as I will suggest momentarily and as may be implicit in his chapter on "Consciousness and Space."

Cognitive Closure and Hints of Rehabilitation

We have yet to look more closely at the general idea of cognitive closure, the subject of the last three premises. The fourth premise, that the human cognitive capacity has an absolute limit beyond which it cannot go, lies at the heart of McGinn's thesis. The notion of a limit to human knowledge is one which few would want to deny. Surely it is presumptuous to say there is no problem, now or in the future, that we cannot eventually solve. It is palliative to espouse a philosophical humility.

On the other hand, it seems to me to be equally presumptuous to assert without qualification that this or that problem is beyond some absolutely determined cognitive limit – except for one very important factor. For it turns out that premises (1), (4) and (5) really collapse into a single premise. The introspective knowledge by acquaintance of consciousness, in telling McGinn that his conscious states cannot be caused by the brain, and the sense-data analysis of perception, are seen by McGinn as establishing that a dualistic mind-set is fundamental to human consciousness itself (McGinn p. 21). We can never escape it. So the argument is really something more like this.

- 1a. Our knowledge by acquaintance of our own conscious states, and our analysis of the process of sense-perception, tells us that our concept-forming capability is fundamentally dualistic.
- 2a. A fundamentally dualistic mind can never conceive of any nondualistic reality.
- 3a. Therefore we can never solve the mind-body problem.

Even though in his view premise (1a) is pretty much self-evident, McGinn turns his attention from Bertrand Russell to Noam Chomsky in a somewhat different argument to support his thesis of cognitive closure. In his chapter “The Problem of Philosophy” he outlines Chomsky’s combinatorial view of language and argues that this implies an absolute limit to cognition. “Cognitive accessibility...turns upon the applicability of the combinatorial paradigm supplied by language” (McGinn, p. 189). When a system begins with some pre-programmed set of principles (or units, or atoms), there must be a limit to the applicability of the possible combinations thereof. But Chomsky’s ideas are also highly controversial and in any case given (1a) the argument from Chomsky is unnecessary.

However, at this point McGinn offers a possible solution to the entire cobweb. He has held throughout, that despite our inability to conceive of how the brain can cause consciousness, the brain nevertheless does so. Therefore McGinn suggests two possibilities. The first of these is that the production of conscious states may lie hidden within “subconscious self-monitoring representations employed by the brain as it goes about its business.” He kindly spares us the agony of having to cope with an explanation of whatever this means by saying it would take too long to expound. Instead he offers a second possibility. The ability of the brain to produce consciousness must be founded on the biological basis of life: the genetic code.

Since...the genes work symbolically, by specifying programmes for generating organisms from the available raw materials, they must contain whatever information is necessary and sufficient for this feat of engineering...They must, that is, specify instructions adequate for creating conscious states out of matter (McGinn, pp. 193-94).

In bringing up the gene possibility, McGinn is looking for a conceptual framework outside the ordinary capability of the human brain that will allow accounting for consciousness. He is suggesting that such a conceptual framework is somehow contained as information within the genes. He does not consider pushing the origin further back in evolutionary time. Genes, after all, have come from matter and energy over the course of cosmic evolution. So what is preventing us from speculating that the information necessary to create the consciousness-creating genes is not somehow embedded in the fundamental structure of matter (i.e. energy) itself? This may be thought of as implying some sort of panpsychism, but that is just a name at this point.

Another option however is implied by McGinn’s discussion of “Consciousness and Space” (Chapter 5). In this chapter, which in my opinion is the very best chapter in the book, he undertakes an analysis of our conception of space, and of consciousness as being non-spatial. Within the common conception of space, “Clearly, the space of perception and action is no place to find the roots of consciousness!” (McGinn, p. 112, his punctuation). His conclusion is that “we need, at a minimum, a new conception of space” (McGinn, p. 105). McGinn is asking for a

paradigm shift, but because in his view our consciousness is structurally dualistic he believes a paradigm shift of this order is impossible for human cognition (McGinn, pp. 21-24).

It is significant that in speaking of space, McGinn only pays lip-service in a parenthetical afterthought to time (McGinn, p. 113). But “the space of perception and action” perforce involves time. Contrary to his assumption that such a space is no place to locate consciousness, space *is* the place. A dynamic spatiotemporal field, or “behavioral field,” is precisely where the proponents of EC theory *do* locate the roots of consciousness. Furthermore the subjectivistic encapsulated ego implicit in the sense-data theory of knowledge is just what theorists like Rockwell and Noë reject in favor of the notion of an “expanded, extended and dynamic” self. It is precisely *action*, and action in a spatiotemporal energetic field, that generates all our scientific knowledge in any case.² The move away from introspective, private perceptual space into the active space of scientific inquiry is what has generated our rapidly evolving cognitive capabilities and allowed us to solve problems such as those that Pyrrho, for example, thought could never be solved because of what appeared to him at the time to be an inherent limitation of our perceptual capacity.

Indeed, McGinn’s speculation about information contained in the genes could equally be applied to Alva Noë’s suggestion that the purpose of the brain is not to cause consciousness directly, but to allow for the higher-level interactions between persons and the world that make possible our cognitive capacity.

Long ago Dewey was calling for precisely the paradigm shift that McGinn is, in effect, asking for. Speaking of the gulf that under the dualistic paradigm separates *experience* and *nature*, Dewey wrote

To many the associating of the two words will seem like talking of a round square...I know of no route by which dialectical argument can answer such objections. They arise from associations with words and cannot be dealt with argumentatively. One can only hope in the course of the whole discussion to disclose the meanings which are attached to “experience” and “nature” and thus insensibly produce, if one is fortunate, a change in the significations previously attached to them (Dewey 1929 pp. 1a-2a).

At this point, then, I leave it to the reader to decide which way may lead to a richer, more productive reality.

Stan V. McDaniel
Professor of Philosophy Emeritus
Sonoma State University

² The earmark of contemporary scientific investigation is that it is *collective* in nature. Communication, peer review, experimentation are necessarily collective enterprises. In these enterprises various safeguards against self-centered egoism are accepted as de rigueur. A recent study “documents the existence of collective intelligence among groups of people who cooperate well, showing that such intelligence extends beyond the cognitive abilities of the groups’ individual members” (<http://www.physorg.com/news205076011.html>). McGinn’s introspective conclusions would seem irrelevant and even false when considering this kind of collective cognition.

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